

Lent 5
2/4/2017

Mark the Evangelist

Psalm 130
John 11:1-45

The light and life of the world

At the heart of our gospel reading this morning we hear Martha's gentle rebuke of Jesus: "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died." It is, at the same time, in its own limited and back-handed way, a confession of faith which declares that when Jesus – God – *is* present such things as this will not happen to those whom he loves.

If we are already persuaded that God is *somewhere*, then we quickly find ourselves pressed to account for God apparently being absent at such crisis moments. Perhaps most common among believers is the thought that God's absence is a matter of punishment. This is implied in the pitiful cry, What have I done to deserve this? Here I *have made* God go away; God's absence is my fault. This is quite problematic in itself, yet there's no suggestion of punishment being applied in our text this morning and so we'll leave it alone for today.

To do justice to what we've heard this morning we have to take seriously the possibility that God is absent simply because he chooses to be. Yet this is offensive to piety. For if God exercises his sovereign will in a choice to be absent – even in our time of need – the result seems to be that we, with Lazarus, die.

The offence we might take at this reason for the absence of God is compounded by what Jesus says and does in the story.

"This illness is not unto death... Our friend Lazarus has fallen asleep, but I go to awake him out of sleep... Lazarus is dead; and for your sake I am glad that I was not there, so that you may believe."

There is no sense of urgency, no sense of lost time, no sense that his absence from his friend's side at the hour of need is a matter of concern.

This attitude – perhaps even this *coldness* to what is happening – seems to change when Jesus meets with the grieving family and friends. Our translation this morning read,

When Jesus saw [Mary] weeping, and the Jews who came with her also weeping, he was greatly disturbed in spirit and deeply moved. ... Jesus began to weep. ... Then Jesus, again greatly disturbed, came to the tomb.

It's been usual in the church to sentimentalise this response of Jesus as an emotional one which resonates with the grief of those around him. And yet, the language is actually much stronger than this. Some scholars and non-English translations have translated the Greek very differently from the familiar English translations:

"Jesus was *angry* in the spirit, and distressed" (Luther); "Jesus became angry in the spirit and was disgusted" (Zürich Bible); "he was inwardly angry and became enraged" (Heitmüller).

The sense here is not sentiment but *wrath*. Jesus has taken *offence* at something. And most likely the explanation is this: Whereas the grieving friends and family are distressed and in tears on account of Lazarus, Jesus himself is distressed on account of the friends and family themselves. He is not feeling sorry for them but is *angry* at them.

So, first Jesus does not answer the sisters' prayer that he come and tend to Lazarus and then he's angered by their very understandable response to the consequence of his inaction! What are we going to do with that?!

At the heart of the matter is the revelation of God's sovereign freedom in the face of all that would seem to overshadow it and us. Jesus' anger with the mourners, his disturbed response to the situation at the tomb, reflects a frustration that, at the end of an intense ministry those closest to him still do not recognise that in *him* all things have their redefinition and so have to be re-thought: *I am the bread of life; I am the light of the world; I am the good shepherd.*

The raising of Lazarus, then, is neither a favour for a friend nor a sorrowful correction of a wrong done to his grieving sisters, but simply the sign that in this Jesus we encounter a sovereign *indifference* to the powers that threaten us, *and* a sovereign desire and capacity to *confront* those powers on our behalf: *I am the resurrection and the life.*

In last week's reading we saw that the focus was not so much the healing of the blind man as it was identifying who *truly* is blind. So also, in today's reading, the question is not death and life as they are dealt with by our hospitals but about what is true life and what is true death, and the ways in which God is absent and present to such death and life. If the story of the blind man put to us the question, Are you seeing clearly?, the story of Lazarus puts to us, How are you dying? [Would it not be an interesting twist on our casual greetings to each other to ask not, How are you going? but How are you dying?]

Someone has characterised Christian discipleship as "the art of dying well". This is not a case of growing old gracefully, or dying with dignity, or being stoically indifferent to death, or any other way we might learn how to die from all the advice available on the subject these days. "Dying well", in this Christian sense, has to do with our approach to death in the light of *God's sovereignty* – God's sovereign absence *and* God's sovereign choice to be *for* us, over against the world which threatens us with death. It is God's choice to be for us which colours his apparent absence, not the other way around; faith says No to the darkness, because dawn is coming.

In the story, the free and sovereign choice of Jesus to be absent from Lazarus in his illness his hour is the same sovereignty he then exercises over death in raising Lazarus: *he* is life, whether present or absent. This is to say, the demonstrated *presence* of God is *not* as important for the people of God as is the confidence that when God *does* come, he comes to reverse the effects of decay and death which have been active in our lives. The proof of this in Jesus' response to the news of Lazarus' illness; it is just that proof which is lacking in Lazarus' friends and family, and Jesus is angry.

We could say, then, that God is unhurried by the threat of death which hangs over our head, *not* because he doesn't care, but because he is the God who raises from the dead and so the God whose coming to us is *always* the promise of life in or out of death. Jesus says to Martha,

"I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live, and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die.

The reality of death – our physical “stopping” – is not denied: “those who believe in me *even though they die*, yet shall they live”, for God is sovereign over death; but then also “they who live and believe will never die”, for God is sovereign over death, so death will not ultimately be death for those in Christ. Those who die and yet live, and those who live and will never die, are the same people.

What is promised is that when God comes, death will not be death for us. And so all that is offered to us – and it is rather a lot! – is the possibility of living life without the shadow of death darkening the way.

Such a view of the power of the threat of death is to reduce it, in the end, to nothing – not because it disappears or ceases to hurt, but because it is *penultimate* – secondary to the greater power of the God who is coming to us because he loves us.

[*To finish up!*:] At the beginning of today’s reading there’s a little exchange between Jesus and the disciples which we’ve not yet acknowledged.

Then after [two days] Jesus said to the disciples, “Let us go to Judea again.” The disciples said to him, “Rabbi, the Jews were just now trying to stone you, and are you going there again?” Jesus answered, “Are there not twelve hours of daylight? Those who walk during the day do not stumble, because they see the light of this world. But those who walk at night stumble, because the light is not in them.”

The freedom by which Jesus overcomes death for Lazarus is reflected in his own ability to move regardless of where death might be lurking in his own life. Like Lazarus, Jesus is himself “ill”, in the sense of being confronted at least with persecution and possibly with death. Yet *unlike* the mourners at the tomb, Jesus lives and walks by a light which they do not see. And so, as real as the threat to his life apparently is, he is nevertheless able to do what needs to be done, because the light by which he sees reveals to him that what threatens him – real and painful enough though it might become – is less than the one who will appear to be absent and yet who is coming with his light and life.

The question the text puts to us, “Are you dying well?” is then also the question, “Are you *living* well? What are the shadows which cause you to jump back in fear and yet which the light of the gospel would wash away? In fact, our lives are filled with such things: deathly claims on our time, relationships, money, ambitions, our very being. And we seek to ward off the encroaching darkness of such things with mere candles which do little other than cast yet more looming shadows, only now that they also flicker and jump and are all the more frightening.

Dying *badly* is dying of *fear*, which is *living* in fear, hands cupped around that little candle lest the wind blow it out.

Dying *well* is living and walking by the light of the one who is himself the life which is light for all (John 1.4).

Let us seek so to live.

By the grace of God, Amen.
